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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 003942

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TAGS: PGOV, PHUM, PREL, PINR, IZ  
SUBJECT: ABU GHRAIB IDPS: A NEW DAY

REF: BAGHDAD 3763

Classified By: Deputy Political Counselor John Fox for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Former residents of Abu Ghraib qada (district) highlight improvements after years of sectarian violence, ruthless attacks by Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and heavy-handed counterattacks led by Brigadier General Nassir al-Hiti's "Muthana" Brigade. Despite five months of targeted house bombings that have led to a temporary moratorium on IDP returns, the population of Abu Ghraib qada feels more secure and optimistic than they did just a few months ago. General Nassir has left the country and his replacement, Colonel Murad, has pledged to work closely with Government of Iraq (GOI) civilian officials and Coalition Forces (CF) to create a more welcoming environment for returnees. BG Nassir had previously allowed some internally displaced persons (IDPs) to return to the area, although these were almost exclusively Shi'a and permitted primarily for strategic, not humanitarian, reasons. END SUMMARY.

NASSIR AND IDPS: A LETHAL MIX  
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2. (C) The previous IA commander for Abu Ghraib, Brigadier General Nassir al-Hiti, used his power and position to manipulate IDP returns in order to redraw

sectarian lines within the district. At BG Nassir's direction, approximately 350 Shi'a families returned to Abu Ghraib between August and October. Very few, if any, Sunni families were permitted to come back to their homes by the IA. Under General Nassir, the IA had complete control over the IDP return process in Abu Ghraib and all intending returnees were required to submit applications to return at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Constitution, the Muthana Brigade's headquarters, which is feared by Sunni residents of the area. Nassir used his authority to verify the legitimacy of IDP claims to permit only Shi'a families returning to militarily -- and economically -- strategic locations within Abu Ghraib to come home.

3. (C) The district is a natural choke-point and transportation hub for the movement of people and goods between Anbar Province in the west and Baghdad in the east, so is important both commercially and politically). The influx of Shi'a families allowed Nassir's Muthana Brigade (24th brigade, 6th division of the IA) to assert more control over the "White Gold" region, so-called for its numerous powdered milk factories, but also one of the most heavily-trafficked transit points for goods in all Iraq. Although he was relieved of command before achieving his apparent goal of establishing complete Shi'a authority in this area, the return of approximately 350 families to the towns of North Kharnabat, South Kharnabat and Zeitun led to increased Shi'a dominance of smuggling and transportation networks in Abu Ghraib.

4. (C) Politically, the inflow of Shi'a isolated Sunnis living in Abu Ghraib from those residing in nearby Ghazaliya, a predominantly Sunni neighborhood just over the border in Baghdad. This targeted resettlement of Shi'a families may also have been intended to influence the upcoming provincial elections by changing the ethno-sectarian makeup of Abu Ghraib. (COMMENT: We cannot say whether BG Nassir acted independently or at the urging of GOI leaders. Regardless, the Sunni population believed that the GOI was at the very least complicit in, if not directing, his actions. END COMMENT). Qada officials and other local residents also allege that Nassir was involved in a ransoming business, whereby his Muthana Brigade would detain a citizen and charge upwards of \$15,000 for their release from custody. Upwards of \$15,000 for their release from custody.

5. (SBU) In early November, BG Nassir was replaced by Colonel Murad, a Sunni officer and member of the mixed Raba'ea tribe. The move has been welcomed by both Sunni and Shi'a leaders of Abu Ghraib. One of Murad's first actions (on the advice of CF) was to extend by 30-days the temporary suspension of IDP returns to Abu Ghraib first declared in mid-October. This suspension has given the IA an opportunity to reassert control over security and attempt to put an end to the recent spate of house-bombings.

A "NEW DAY" IN ABU GHRAIB

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5. (U) A number of other factors have also contributed to a recent optimism in Abu Ghraib. On November 22, the qada welcomed over 200 guests to the opening of the district's new Governance Center. During the press conference following the ceremony, local leaders, both military and civilian, reiterated the importance of establishing an open and

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transparent process to encourage IDPs of all sects to return to their homes in Abu Ghraib. Noting that the return of IDPs was the key to restoring normalcy to the region, Col. Murad added that "we (IA) need to provide the proper environment for residents to return. It's a new day in Abu Ghraib." Abu Ghraib's qa'im makam concurred, adding that the local government would "assist with reconciliation in every way possible."

QADA LEADERS: CAUTIOUSLY OPTIMISTIC  
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6. (SBU) In a wide-ranging December 2 discussion with the qada council chairman and the chairmen of three of Abu Ghraib's four nahia (subdistrict) councils, local leaders were optimistic that many former residents will soon begin to return to their former homes. A new IDP processing center, to be co-located with the Governance Center, will assist the local government's IDP efforts. Returning residents will have the benefit of a "one-stop shop" for the preparation of their documentation and their transition back into their former homes. The office will be staffed by representatives from each of the four nahias, IA and IP. The qada council and representatives from the deed office and ID department will also be there to help. CF will assist with set-up and will monitor progress and track returnees, as it has done at other IDP processing centers in the area (reftel). Previously, each separate nahia has been responsible for assisting IDPs, leading to confusion and frustration among returning residents.

7. (U) Although some returnees have received compensation from the GOI, many families are unaware of the two GOI payments to which they are entitled (a million-dinar disbursement to each returning IDP and a separate fund established by the Baghdad Governor to help rebuild houses damaged or destroyed during the resident's absence); once the permanent processing center opens in December, this information will be readily available to returnees.

8. (C) Nahia and qada leaders are eager to re-start returns. They know of more than 200 families ready to come back the moment the moratorium has been lifted. They estimate over 5,000 families are interested in returning to the district, and are confident that the new procedures for shepherding

returnees through the process will be able to deal with the influx. Kammel Abbas, Abu Ghraib's qada council chairman, repeatedly referred to the dramatic improvement in security as the primary reason for the expected increase in IDP returns. He was optimistic that the replacement of the IA commander in the district will lead to a decline in violence targeted against IDPs. He was hopeful that the new IA leadership will result in increased cooperation among the military, police and civilian authorities in Abu Ghraib, and emphasized the need for qada oversight of the return process to ensure its objectivity and fairness to all segments of the population.

9. (SBU) The past few weeks have also witnessed a flurry of other hopeful developments. For the first time in recent memory, the qada council has had a quorum of members regularly attend meetings; numerous GOI-funded road improvement projects have been completed without CF involvement; high-level GOI officials, including Deputy Prime Minister Rafi Essawi and Baghdad Governor Hussein Tahan, have made official visits to the region; the Abu Ghraib market is undergoing a complete renovation and revitalization. While it remains to be seen whether the security gains of the past month are permanent, there is a sense within Abu Ghraib that the worst is over. Qsense within Abu Ghraib that the worst is over.  
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